

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

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FM AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7130
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
AMEMBASSY MANILA
AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
AMEMBASSY TOKYO

C O N F I D E N T I A L SINGAPORE 0635

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: EGEN, ETRD, EINV, ASEAN
SUBJ: ASEAN DIALOGUE WITH THE US AND RELATED MATTERS AS SEEN
BY SINGAPORE FOREIGN MINISTER

SUMMARY. GOS FOREIGN MINISTER RAJARATNAM STATES THAT SINGAPORE WILL PUSH A "NEW STRATEGY" FOR ECONOMIC AGREEMENTS INVOLVING SOME BUT NOT ALL ASEAN PARTNERS IF THE REMAINDER POSE NO FORMAL OBJECTION, THEREBY CONTINUING ASEAN'S MOMENTUM TOWARD ECONOMIC INTEGRATION. RAJA ALSO DOWNPLAYED MALAYSIAN RELUCTANCE TO COMMENCE WITH US-ASEAN DIALOGUE, OPINED THAT ASEAN WOULD MAKE THE NEXT APPROACH REGARDING OUR DIALOGUE, SAID THE GOS HAD RESTRAINED FILIPINO EAGERNESS TO CONCLUDE AN EVEN DEEPER BILATERAL TARIFF CUT AND CONFIRMED THAT THE GOS WAS PLEASED WITH THE RESULTS OF PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW'S TRIP TO THAILAND. RAJA'S PLEASURE IN THE PACE OF EVENTS DIFFERS FROM PM LEE'S CHARACTERISTICALLY GLOOMY INTERPRETATION. END SUMMARY.

1. FOLLOWING A MEETING I HAD WITH SINGAPORE FOREIGN MINISTER RAJARATNAM FEBRUARY 9 ON ANOTHER MATTER, HE BROUGHT UP THE CONFIDENTIAL

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SUBJECT OF THE JANUARY 27 ASEAN STANDING COMMITTEE CONSENSUS CONCERNING A US-ASEAN ECONOMIC DIALOGUE. THIS WAS "ALL RIGHT", HE SAID, AND ALL OF THE ASEAN COUNTRIES WERE AGREED ON THE DESIRABILITY OF THE DIALOGUE. THE QUESTION OF HOW ASEAN WOULD RESPOND FORMALLY TO THE AIDE MEMOIRE GIVEN TO MRS. MANOLO BY EMBASSY MANILA WOULD BE DISCUSSED AT THE FORTHCOMING ASEAN FOREIGN MINISTERS' MEETING IN MANILA BEGINNING FEBRUARY 24.

2. NOT HAVING THE BENEFIT OF KUALA LUMPUR'S 0882, I MENTIONED

TO RAJA A REPORT WE HAD RECEIVED TO THE EFFECT THAT THE MALAYSIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY WAS NOT ANXIOUS TO PROCEED WITH THE US-ASEAN DIALOGUE AT THIS TIME. RAJA SUGGESTED BY HIS RELAXED RESPONSE THAT HE HAD HEARD SOMETHING ABOUT MALAYSIAN RESERVATIONS BUT DID NOT TAKE THEM TOO SERIOUSLY. HE REPEATED THAT, AS NOTED, ALL ASEAN PARTNERS HAD AGREED AT THE STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING ON DESIRABILITY OF MOVING AHEAD. HE SPECULATED THAT THE PRESUMED MALAYSIAN RESERVATIONS MIGHT HAVE BEEN DUE IN PART TO REMNANTS OF A "PROGRESSIVE" ATTITUDE IN THE FOREIGN MINISTRY, WHICH HAD HITHERTO ADVOCATED TO A DOWNGRADING OF US-ASEAN TIE. MORE IMPORTANTLY, HOWEVER, MALAYSIA HAD NOT YET STRAIGHTENED OUT THE TERMS OF ITS THIRD MALAYSIA PLAN REGARDING FOREIGN INVESTMENT AND HENCE WAS RELUCTANT TO SEE THE OTHER ASEAN COUNTRIES PROCEED WHEN IT WAS OBLIGED TO LAG BEHIND (RAJA'S THESIS WAS THAT ONCE FOREIGN INVESTORS SAW THE ADVANTAGES OF DEALING WITH ASEAN, THEY WOULD BE KNOCKING ON ITS DOOR).

3. I THEN SAID TO RAJA THAT ON THE BASIS OF HIS REMARKS TO ME, I ASSUMED THE US NEED NOT TAKE ANY PARTICULAR ACTION BUT SHOULD WAIT UNTIL WE HEARD FROM THE ASEAN PARTNERS. HE AGREED. I MENTIONED IN PASSING THAT I HAD HEARD THAT MRS. MANOLO, WHO HAD HANDLED THE US-ASEAN CONTACT IN MANILA, WOULD NOT BE BACK FROM MATERNITY LEAVE UNTIL MARCH 1. RAJA LAUGHED, AND SAID SHE SEEMED TO BE TAKING A LONG LEAVE -- HE HAD MET HER AT A DINNER DURING LEE KUAN YEW'S MANILA VISIT AND HAD SEEMED PERFECTLY RECOVERED THEN.
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4. ON THE SUBJECT OF SINGAPORE-PHILIPPINE ECONOMIC TIES, RAJA NOTED THAT THE PHILIPPINES HAD BEEN VERY EAGER TO EFFECT THE 10 PERCENT ACROSS-THE-BOARD TARIFF REDUCTION AND IN FACT HAD WANTED TO PUSH A TARIFF REDUCTION OF 15 OR 20 PERCENT. SINGAPORE HAD TALKED THE FILIPINOS OUT OF THIS ON THE GROUNDS THAT IT WAS TOO MUCH OF A JUMP TOO SOON. RAJA ADDED THAT THE ATMOSPHERICS OF THE LEE VISIT HAD BEEN VERY GOOD, AND THAT A NUMBER OF ECONOMIC ARRANGEMENTS HAD BEEN AGREED UPON WHICH WOULD BE COMING TO LIGHT IN DUE COURSE, INCLUDING A CIVIL AIR AGREEMENT WHICH, HE SAID, LOOKING STRAIGHT AT ME, "YOU PROBABLY WON'T LIKE" (COMMENT: I HAVE NO IDEA AS TO WHAT MAY BE INVOLVED; CONCEIVABLY SOME FORM OF AGREEMENT ON RECIPROCAL RIGHTS MAY BE AWAITING US WHICH WOULD HAVE A BEARING ON FLAG-CARRIER'S FREQUENCIES TO THE U.S.).

5. RAJA SAID THAT SINGAPORE IS NOW WORKING ON A NEW ECONOMIC STRATEGY REGARDING ASEAN: IF SEVERAL OF THE ASEAN COUNTRIES AGREE ON A STEP BUT OTHERS HANG BACK, THOSE IN AGREEMENT WILL GO AHEAD PROVIDED THE OTHERS DO NOT OFFICIALLY OBJECT. IN SUCH A WAY MOMENTUM CAN BE MAINTAINED, RAJA SAID, AND HE COMMENTED AT THIS POINT THAT HE BELIEVED A DEGREE OF MOMENTUM HAS INDEED BEEN ESTABLISHED. RAJA STATED THAT SINGAPORE NOW ALSO HOPES TO SEE THE PHILIPPINES AND THAILAND WORK OUT A MUTUAL 10 PERCENT ACROSS-THE-BOARD TARIFF REDUCTION OF THEIR OWN, WHICH WOULD

THEN BRING SINGAPORE, THAILAND, AND THE PHILIPPINES INTO AN IDENTICAL RELATIONSHIP.

6. RAJA CONFIRMED WHAT I HAD HEARD FROM PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW TO THE EFFECT THAT THE SINGAPOREANS WERE PLEASED WITH PM LEE'S TRIP TO THAILAND. THE THAI HAD BEEN VERY RESPONSIVE, AND THE KING IN PARTICULAR HAD BEEN ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT SINGAPORE PARTICIPATION IN THAILAND'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS AWAY FROM BANGKOK. RAJA MENTIONED THAT SINGAPORE WAS HAPPY TO INVEST IN A CATTLE-RAISING PROJECT IN SOUTH THAILAND, AND ALSO WOULD BE WILLING TO TAKE THAI GOATS (FOR "TRANSSHIPMENT")
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TO THE MIDDLE EAST), THAI VEGETABLES, AND ALSO PIGS. WHEN I EXPRESSED SOME SURPRISE ABOUT PIGS, SINGAPORE ALREADY BEING SELF-SUFFICIENT, RAJA SAID THAT SINGAPORE FELT IT MAY HAVE GONE A BIT TOO FAR IN ITS OWN PIG PRODUCTION DUE TO PROBLEMS SUCH AS WASTE DISPOSAL ON ITS SMALL LAND AREA, AND PLANNED TO CUT BACK PIG PRODUCTION SOMEWHAT THOUGH AT A RATE SLOW ENOUGH TO PREVENT ECONOMIC DISRUPTIONS.

7. IN CONNECTION WITH SINGAPORE-THAI ECONOMIC RELATIONS, RAJA REMARKED THAT IF A CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT OCCURRED IN THAILAND HE DOUBTED THESE RELATIONS WOULD BE AFFECTED. IT WAS HIS IMPRESSION THAT THE MILITARY AS A WHOLE WAS IN FAVOR OF THE POLICIES PRESENTLY ADOPTED, AS WAS THE CIVILIAN LEADERSHIP, AND A CHANGE AT THE TOP WOULD NOT AFFECT THE PRESENT COURSE. IN PASSING, HE REFERRED TO REMARKS MADE TO HIM BY A REPORTER OF THE THAI NEWSPAPER, "NEW NATION", ABOUT GEN. PRAPHAT'S POPULARITY BEING ON THE RISE, PRAPHAT HAVING BEEN APPLAUDED BY THE PEOPLE WHEN HE WALKED AROUND BANGKOK. THE REPORTER ATTRIBUTED THIS CHANGED ATTITUDE TO A BELIEF THAT PRAPHAT, HAVING ALREADY MADE IT, COULD NOW CONCENTRATE MORE EFFECTIVELY ON THE POLITICAL ACCOMMODATIONS NECESSARY TO RUNNING THE GOVERNMENT - SOMETHING WHICH THANIN HAD NEITHER THE SKILL NOR THE EXPERIENCE TO DO.

8. COMMENT: THERE APPEARS TO BE SOME LACK OF CLARITY IN RAJA'S MIND AS TO JUST WHAT ASEAN'S NEXT STEPS WILL BE IN OPENING A DIALOGUE WITH THE US, PERHAPS DUE TO THE FACT THAT K.C. LEE, RAJA'S DEPUTY, CHAIRED THE STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING. IN ANY EVENT, RAJA'S MOOD IN TALKING ABOUT ASEAN ECONOMIC PROSPECTS DIFFERED IN SOME DEGREE WITH THAT OF PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW. PRIME MINISTER LEE, IN COMMENTING ON THE SAME SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES, TOOK A CHARACTERISTICALLY GLOOMY VIEW WHILE RAJA WAS MORE EBULLIENT. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THEM MIGHT BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN A LONG-RANGE VIEW BY A PROPONENT OF THE WORST CASE (PM LEE) AND A DAY-TO-DAY PRACTITIONER WHO IS HAPPY TO SEE ANY PROGRESS WHATSOEVER, HOWEVER SLIGHT. HOLDRIDGE
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